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ABSTRACT

The effects of both early and late father-absence upon school achievement, cognitive development, and emotional development of 27 Australian males between 9 and 12 years of age were examined. Three groups of boys were evaluated in order to ascertain the effects of paternal deprivation. These groups included children experiencing (1) early father-absence (deprivation occurring before age 5), (2) late father-absence (deprivation occurring after age 5), and (3) no absence of father. It was hypothesized that those subjects with absent fathers would manifest significant deficits on mathematics, vocabulary, and language comprehension abilities as compared with those subjects whose fathers were present. It was further hypothesized that those subjects who experienced paternal deprivation prior to 5 years of age would show the greatest deficit on the three achievement measures used. Also expected were significant differences in self-concept, with males undergoing early deprivation showing poorer self-concept than those who were not deprived. Results indicated that the performance of subjects with fathers present was significantly superior on all achievement measures to that of boys whose fathers were absent. However, no significant differences were revealed between the two groups undergoing early and late paternal deprivation, nor were any differences found between these groups on self-concept measures. The possible reasons for these findings in terms of theory and in comparison with similar studies in other countries are discussed. (Author/MP)

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Father Absence and School Achievement in Australian Boys

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Abstract

Father Absence and School Achievement in Australian Boys

Kenneth K. Berry and Michael Poncini

The bulk of the research which has been done in North America indicates that father absence generally interferes with children's development, particularly the development of male children. In the present study the effects of previous father absence, both early and late, upon school achievement of Australian boys were examined along with self concept. In order to ascertain the effects of father absence 3 groups of boys were examined. These were the following: Early father absence (deprivation occurring before age 5), late father absence (occurring after age 5), and father present boys. It was hypothesized that those subjects who were father absent would manifest significant deficits on mathematics, vocabulary and language comprehension abilities as compared with father present subjects. It was further hypothesized that those subjects who experienced paternal deprivation prior to 5 years would show the greatest deficit on the three achievement measures used. Also expected were significant differences in self concept with early deprivation males showing poorer self concept. Twenty-seven boys from a metropolitan boarding school in Brisbane, Australia were divided into 3 groups; because of the small sample size subjects were matched on age, intelligence and grade level. Only subjects whose father deprivation was the result of parental

divorce or separation were used and only those where there was no history of a stepfather, older brother or an adult male present in their home lives. The findings indicated that father present subjects were significantly superior to father absent boys on all achievement measures. No significant differences between early father absence and late father absence boys were revealed. There were no differences between the groups on self concept measures. The possible reasons for these findings in terms of theory and comparison with similar studies in other countries is discussed.

The bulk of research done in North America indicates that father absence generally interferes with children's development, particularly the development of male children. In general, it appears that paternal presence and nurturance have a substantial relationship to cognitive development in children. Specifically, Shaw & White (1965) found that male children who are identified more closely with their fathers tended to achieve better than those who tended to identify with their mothers. Other researchers such as Santrock (1972) found the relationship between early father absence and underachieving in boys. This was particularly true in the area of mathematics achievement. Santrock found that early father-absent males clearly underachieved with a lesser handicap being present in later father-absence boys. In a study of father avilability and academic performance Blanchard and Biller (1971) found that boys who experienced father absence prior to reaching three years of age scored lowest on all cognitive measures in addition to having lowest school grade levels in language and mathematics in comparison to those father-absent after five years. Sentrock's work indicated that absence occurring in the first two years of life more handicapping on cognitive measures. Boys whose father absence begins between birth and five years appear to be more handicapped in intellectual development as compared with those who begin father absence after five years of age.

As early as 1969, Busse found that father absence interferes with the development of flexible thinking. Lessing, Zagorin & Nelson

(1970) found in males only, a deficit in arithmetic performance on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, and they attributed such a deficit to father absence. In addition, a number of researchers such as Mussen, Young, Gaddini, and Morante (1963), have presented data to support the hypothesis that paternal nurturance is closely related to their sons' self esteem and personality adjustment. Thus, it seems plausible that paternal deprivation could lead to maladjustment and anxiety, which in turn may result in diminished stimulation from the environment and social interaction. The child who is assertive and engages in exploratory behavior and active social interaction could be expected to learn at a more rapid rate.

Although some of the research is inconsistent with these results, it generally is accepted that father absence exerts a profound influence upon child development, especially with males. Unfortunately, all research to date has been conducted in North America with American children.

In the present study, the effects of both early and late father absence upon the cognitive and emotional development of Australian males between nine and twelve years of age were examined. Three groups of boys were evaluated in order to ascertain the effects of father absence. These groups included: (1) early father absence (paternal deprivation commencing before age five), (2) late father absence (paternal deprivation occurring after age five), and

(3) father-present boys. It was hypothesized that those subjects whose fathers were absent would manifest significant deficits on measures of mathematics and language abilities as compared with father-present subjects. It further was hypothesized that those subjects who experienced paternal deprivation prior to five years would show the greatest deficits on the achievement measures. Significant differences in self concept, with early deprivation males showing the poorest self concept, also were predicted.

Method

Subjects Subjects consisted of 27 Australian males aged between nine and twelve years of age who were enrolled in a metropolitan boarding school for elementary age school boys. All subjects were in the fourth through sixth year of school. They were divided into three groups and were matched on age, learning ability and grade level, due to the small sample size of subjects. Father deprivation in the father-absent groups was the result of divorce or parental separation.

Procedure Australian standardized tests were used for all measures. General academic ability was measured by Australian Council for Educational Research (A.C.E.R.) tests of ability and the mean scores were used for matching purposes. The A.C.E.R. tests provide a score indicating general ability which is derived from scores on three subtests consisting of vocabulary, general reasoning and recognition task of verbal analogies.

Achievement in math was measured with the Moreton Mathematics Test (Levels II and III). Reading measures were obtained from the Progressive Achievement Tests of Reading (Form A) which measures both reading comprehension and vocabulary. The Primary Self Concepts Test (Andrews, 1970) was utilized to assess the subjects' self esteem. This instrument is an Australian developed test which yields the following six subscale measures: A) Self-striving for success, self sufficiency and confidence, B) Self tense apprehensive, C) Self concept in terms of social adequacy, D) Self as aggressive and hostile, E) Physical and psychological self worth, and F) Self concept in terms of conscientiousness and conformity.

Results and Discussion

Matched t-tests were performed comparing all groups. The father-present group performed significantly better than both early and late father-absent groups on language comprehension, vocabulary, and mathematics achievement. There were no significant differences between the early father-absent group and the late father-absent group. Matched t-tests comparing father-present subjects to both early and late father-absent groups on the six subscales of primary self concepts tests were not significant. The hypothesis that both father-absent groups would perform significantly poorer on academic measures as compared with the present group, was supported. Thus, it appears that father-present Australian boys tend to achieve significantly better than father-absent children. However, the hypothesis that

boys deprived of fathers early in life performed significantly poorer academically than boys who are deprived later in life was not supported.

The finding that father-absent boys perform more poorly than father-present boys is in line with previous research findings. The fact that the early father-absent boys did not perform significantly poorer on academic achievement is not in line with previous research and is difficult to interpret. Previous researchers have found that decrements in intellectual performance are related to age of onset of father absence (e.g. Blanchard and Biller, 1971; Landy, Rosenberg, and Sutton-Smith, 1969; Sutton-Smith, Rosenberg, and Landy, 1968).

Research into cognitive deficits related to father absence can be linked to two primary variables. First, loss of a male identification model may be relevant. Shaw and White (1960) related boy's identification with father to academic achievement, and Blanchard and Biller (1971) postulated that academic performance is related to fathers providing their sons with models of perseverence and achievement motivation. In particular, their research has indicated that father surrogates can provide male identification models. However, despite school and teaching staff being predominantly male, it is unlikely that the teacher-child relationship would be equivalent to the father-son relationship in the present sample. Even if the father surrogate effect was present within this sample, it is

doubtful that it would occur in a majority of the subjects and exert that powerful an influence on the outcome of the study. Second, the emotional stress initiated by family dissolution and subsequent father absence could result in an increase in the child's anxiety level. Kohn and Rosman (1973) believed cognitive functioning in five-year-old boys to be a function of the child's background and emotional functioning. In addition, Maccoby and Rau (1962) termed such anxiety and its effects "anxiety interference" and related it to deficits in cognitive performance. However, none of the scales from the Primary Self Concept Test, including tenseness and apprehensiveness, showed significant differences between the two groups. Consequently, "anxiety interference", which may detrimentally affect cognitive performance, is not readily apparent. This may be due to two factors. First, the subjects are from middle class backgrounds which are better able to absorb the financial strain of family dissolution; and second, the child's absence from home, since this was a boarding school sample, insulates him from the periodic emotional stresses peculiar to the household with an absent father.

In the present study, two possible variables may have produced confounding results. First, there was some ambiguity in regard to socioeconomic status of the subjects. Previous researchers have assessed socioeconomic status by either mother's current income, the combined income of the two parents, or the occupation of the

father prior to divorce. It must be noted that in general, the socioeconomic status of families following father's departure is lower than it was previously. In contrast, the assessment of socioeconomic status of subjects in this study was made on the basis of the school they attended. Consequently, the students were drawn from the middle and upper middle class of the Australian population due to the status of the school. Second, the events prior to family dissolution are many and varied, some of which have long term effects on the child and thereby could influence these results. In this study, these factors were not explored and could have accounted for the lack of difference between early and late father absence boys.

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